

**Public Roundtable on
Police Utilization of Red-Light and Speed Cameras**

**Committee on the Judiciary
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chair**

Council of the District of Columbia



**Testimony of
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Chief of Police
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Chairperson Mendelson, members of the Committee, staff and guests – I thank you for the opportunity to report on the Metropolitan Police Department's use of photo enforcement technology in our city. As is my custom, the complete text of my statement is posted on the Department's website: www.mpd.dc.gov.

Looking back over the past six years – and analyzing the most recent data on our program – I can report that automated traffic enforcement in the District of Columbia is making our roadways and our neighborhoods safer for motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists and residents in general. Since the implementation of this innovative traffic safety program, fewer motorists in DC are running red lights, fewer motorists are speeding aggressively and, most important of all, fewer people are being killed in traffic crashes – in particular, traffic crashes caused by speeding.

Credit for the success of our program goes to many people: the DC Council, for passing one of the country's most progressive automated traffic enforcement bills back in 1990s; the men and women of the Metropolitan Police Department, for designing and managing a program that is fair, effective and fiscally responsible; other District of Columbia government agencies – the Departments of Motor Vehicles, Transportation, Traffic Adjudication and others – for providing assistance in areas such as signs, engineering support and adjudication; a vendor that has been responsive to our needs and the needs of the motoring public; and, of course, DC residents and community leaders, who have steadfastly supported the program and encouraged the use of technology to make their neighborhoods safer.

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When I became Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department almost seven years ago, one of the first things I did was to commission a survey of DC residents. The purpose of the survey was to help me understand the community's issues and concerns. Given the District's traditionally high violent crime rate, I expected serious crime problems to top the list. Instead, the survey revealed that the top public safety concerns of residents were generally social or disorder problems. And at the very top of that list was aggressive driving – namely, running red lights and stop signs. It was identified by nearly 6 in 10 residents citywide as a serious problem in their neighborhoods.

Like police departments across the country, the MPD had used traditional enforcement approaches to reducing red-light running – primarily assigning uniformed officers to stop and cite violators. But in reality, the problem here was so prevalent, that it was virtually impossible for the police to have a measurable and lasting impact. We simply could not change the aggressive driving behavior of the massive numbers of motorists who were running red lights, just by pulling over and ticketing a tiny fraction of the violators.

So in the summer of 1999, the District turned to a traffic safety tool that had been used for years in Europe, Australia and Canada, and which was showing great potential in New York, the Phoenix area and other US locations. In August 1999, the MPD activated our first red-light intersection safety camera, at the corner of New York Avenue and 4th Street, NW. In that first month alone, that one camera captured 7,598 red-light running violations. That meant that each and every hour of each and every day, there were 10 motorists who were endangering themselves, their passengers, and other motorists and pedestrians by running the red light at just that one intersection.

We knew very quickly that our residents were correct in their assessment: red-light running was a rampant public safety problem in the District, and we needed to do something about it. So over the course of the next 13 months, we expanded the program to 39 camera-equipped intersections – with locations in every quadrant, every police district and every ward of the city. By having this many cameras in place, our goal was not only to reduce aggressive driving at these particular intersections, but also to create a “halo” or “spillover” effect that would lead motorists to be more cautious at every intersection.

While we have not been able to conduct a study to measure this halo effect, we do know, clearly and definitively, that red-light running has been reduced – and reduced significantly – at the intersections with traffic safety cameras. At the New York Avenue and 4th Street, NW location, the number of violations has dropped 86 percent, to 1,063 in January 2005. Don’t get me wrong: 1,000 people running a single red light in a month is still outrageous in my mind. But we have dramatically reduced this dangerous and illegal behavior at this intersection.

And the experience at New York and 4th is the rule, not the exception:

- At East Capitol Street and Benning Road, NE: 1,159 violations in October 1999 (the first month that camera was in operation) ... in January 2005, 172 violations – a reduction of 85 percent.
- At Suitland Parkway and Stanton Road, SE: in January 2000, 1,624 violations ... in January 2005, 527 – a reduction of 68 percent.
- At Wisconsin Avenue and Brandywine Street, NW: in July 2000, 1,365 violations ... last month, 156 violations – a reduction of almost 89 percent.
- And at New York Avenue and Bladensburg Road, NE, where we have three cameras: there has been an 83 percent reduction in red-light running ... from 3,077 to 444 violations a month.

At the 39 camera locations combined, red-light running has been cut by a remarkable 77 percent – from nearly 38,000 violations a month when the program began, to fewer than 8,500 violations in January 2005. That’s the equivalent of 29,000 fewer motorists running red lights each and every month ... 29,000 fewer potential crashes ... and a significantly reduced risk of injury and death than if our program had not been implemented.

I cannot sit here today and quantify how many crashes were prevented, how many injuries were avoided, how many lives were saved because significantly fewer people are running red lights today as a result of photo enforcement – it is impossible for me to “prove a negative.” But I can tell you one thing: given the choice between having 38,000 red-light runners a month or 8,500, I will choose the latter.

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While our success with red-light cameras was immediate and dramatic, our traffic safety problems did not go away. In fact, our number one traffic safety concern – aggressive speeding – was still rampant throughout the city. In recent years, speeding had a primary or secondary factor in a large percentage of fatal crashes in DC, a rate that far exceeded the national average. So in July 2001, the MPD expanded our use of automated traffic safety technology to combat the even more serious problem of speeding on city streets.

We kicked off our photo radar program at the corner of MacArthur Boulevard and Arizona Avenue, NW – just blocks from the spot where 81-year-old Sylvia Zimmerman, a long-time Palisades resident, had been struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver just months earlier. Councilmember Patterson joined us that day, along with

community members and traffic safety advocates from across the city. We announced that the MPD would begin deploying five mobile photo radar vehicles in enforcement zones throughout the District – residential streets, arteries and some highway locations where speeding and speeding-related crashes had been a problem. We had a month-long warning period in July, and began ticketing in early August.

And just as we saw dramatic reductions in red-light running with the installation of the intersection safety cameras, we also experienced immediate and significant reductions in speeding in those locations where we deployed photo radar. Over the past four years, in fact, there have been reductions not only in the percentage of motorists who are speeding aggressively – that is, traveling above the threshold speed for the program. There have also been reductions in the average speeds of all motorists traveling on our roadways. So we have made tremendous progress in achieving our overall goal of getting motorists to slow down in our communities.

Again, let me provide some statistics. During the July 2001 warning period, almost 31 percent of all motorists traveling in photo radar enforcement zones were speeding aggressively. By January 2005, that number had plummeted to just 3.3 percent of all motorists. Put another way ... whereas 1 in 3 motorists used to speed aggressively in DC, that number is now 1 in 30 – a truly amazing accomplishment, as far as I am concerned.

As for the average speeds of all motorists, they have declined on every type of roadway where we have used photo radar. Take 25-mile-per-hour zones, our residential streets. When we began photo radar, the average driver was traveling 35.5 miles per hour on our residential streets. In January 2005, the average motorist was traveling 25.4 miles per hour – just slightly above the speed limit for residential streets. The pattern has been the same on every type of roadway: 30-, 35-, 40-, 45- and 50-mile-per-hour zones: we have seen significant reductions in the rate of aggressive speeding, and in the average speeds of motorists. A few specific examples:

- In the 2800 block of New York Avenue, NE – what had become a raceway out of the city: in January 2004, 28 percent of motorists were speeding aggressively, and the average speed was 45.5 miles per hour. A year later, the aggressive speeding rate was down to 5 percent, and the average speed was 38 miles per hour.
- In the 3600 block of Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, SE: in January 2004, 22 percent of motorists were speeding aggressively, and the average speed was 31 miles per hour. One year later, aggressive speeding was down to 6 percent, and the average speed was 26 miles per hour.
- And in the 600 block of Florida Avenue, NE, in front of Gallaudet University, where the District installed the first stationary speeding reduction camera in North America: the rate of aggressive speeding has fallen from more than 10 percent to less than 3 percent – a significant accomplishment when you consider that this is essentially a school zone that serves a unique population in our city.

Perhaps the most encouraging news is that the reduction in aggressive driving seems to be contributing to a reduction in traffic fatalities in the city as a whole. In 2004, DC recorded 45 traffic fatalities – the lowest annual total in the 18 years for which we have data. What's particularly encouraging is that the number of fatalities caused by speeding has been cut in half in the four years that photo radar has been in operation. In 2001, there were 38 fatalities in which speeding was the primary contributing factor. In 2004, that number had fallen to just 17. We saw similar reductions in red-light running fatalities in the years immediately after the start-up of our red-light camera program, reaching a low of just two such fatalities in 2001. Those numbers have begun to

increase again in recent years – a situation that we are certainly monitoring.

A comprehensive set of statistics, as well as the locations of our red-light cameras and photo radar enforcement zones, are posted on the Police Department's website. From the beginning, we have been open and transparent about the operation of these programs, and we are proud of the public safety improvements we have been able to bring about.

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We are also proud that these gains have been achieved at no cost to District taxpayers and without diminishing neighborhood patrols or community policing efforts. The fines generated as a result of automated traffic enforcement have more than offset the costs associated with managing the program. And we have not had to take uniformed police officers away from their regular PSA duties in order to reduce aggressive driving. In fact, automated traffic enforcement serves as a “force multiplier,” allowing us to achieve both traffic safety and neighborhood safety benefits without having to choose between the two.

Let me take a moment to address the whole “safety-versus-revenue” debate that has been advanced by some people in an attempt to challenge our program. First, I would remind those critics of one important fact: ticketing and fining drivers who violate the law has always been a hallmark of traffic enforcement. Fines, along with the points that are assessed to most violators, are the primary way in which the police get aggressive drivers to change their behavior. And, of course, violators who receive photo-enforced tickets don't even receive points in DC. But those drivers do change their behavior when they receive tickets and fines – or even when they know that the possibility of being ticketed and fined is substantially increased. Our statistics prove that.

Second, there seems to be a belief that there are somehow locations where cameras can be used to generate revenue and locations where cameras can be used to promote safety – when in reality, there are simply locations where people are violating traffic laws with total disregard for the safety of our residents. Putting traffic safety cameras in these locations achieves one overarching goal: getting more people to obey the law. Do these cameras generate fines in the meantime? Absolutely, as would traditional traffic enforcement in these same areas. But the fact of the matter is that as violations go down at each location, so do the number of tickets issued and fines collected.

Finally, for those motorists who are still offended by the fact that the District is enforcing our traffic safety laws – and for collecting the fines associated with the violations – I have a simple piece of advice: slow down, obey the speed limit and stop at red lights. It's that's simple. The fines that are assessed to aggressive drivers are purely voluntary on their part. And it is completely within the power of those drivers to never be ticketed or fined again.

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In closing, let me state that while the MPD is pleased with our progress in reducing aggressive driving and making our streets safer, problems still remain. More than 8,000 people running red lights each month at the 39 intersections equipped with cameras is unacceptable. So is the number of people who continue to speed aggressively – endangering themselves and others. And with congestion and gridlock on the Beltway and other highways increasing, we can expect even more motorists will be trying to make up “lost time” by driving

aggressively once they reach the District.

In response to these continuing concerns, the MPD is expanding both our photo enforcement program and our traditional traffic enforcement efforts, especially in areas such as drunk driving, seat belt compliance and other forms of aggressive driving.

Last Friday, we activated four new stationary photo radar cameras – in the 4700 block of MacArthur Boulevard, NW; the 2800 block of Benning Road, NE; the 100 block of Michigan Avenue, NE; and the 5400 block of 16th Street, NW. During a 30-day warning period, only warnings will be mailed to violators. Ticketing will begin on March 21. In addition, we have obtained two new marked police cruisers for use in mobile photo radar enforcement, as well as two vans that will be dedicated to enforcement in road construction zones. We will be rolling out these resources in the near future. We also plan to install at least 10 new red-light cameras at intersections with a high crash-risk.

We are implementing these program expansions with the strong support of the communities who will benefit from them. We know, from both anecdotal evidence and hard survey data, that large majorities of people support the use of traffic safety cameras to combat red-light running and aggressive speeding. National surveys commissioned by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and others, as well as surveys locally by the Smooth Operator campaign and even AAA Mid-Atlantic, have found strong public support for the use of this technology to combat aggressive driving. And our Traffic Safety Unit regularly gets requests from individual residents and community groups asking for cameras in their neighborhoods.

Why? Because just as our residents know that aggressive driving is still a major public safety concern in their neighborhoods, they also know that having traffic safety cameras in their neighborhoods does change driving behavior. The cameras get people to slow down and to stop at red lights. And that improves the quality of life for everyone.

Thank you again for the opportunity to read this statement into the record. I will be happy to answer your questions.